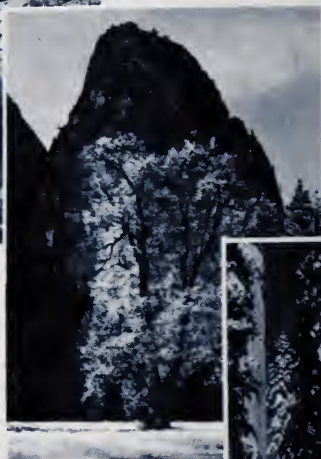


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JUNE 1959



59 - YOSEMITE'S FIRST PHOTOGRAPH - 1959



IN COOPERATION WITH THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE.

The gentleman on the right in this photograph is Mr. Eadweard Muybridge, an early Yosemite photographer and famous for his pictures of objects in motion.



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NO. 6

CHARLES L. WEED, YOSEMITE'S FIRST PHOTOGRAPHER

By Mary V. Hood

The Scene is set, the Hunt is on:

The party of five San Francisco tourists had arrived tired and dusty. The hour was late, the date, June 7th, 1859. They had hired a guide and horses for the final leg of their journey. That night they had camped at Deer Flat and although they had started at seven-thirty the next morning (the 17th) they did not reach the floor of Yosemite Valley until sunset. They still had a six mile ride before they reached their destination at nine-thirty. Although the hotel was new, it was far from luxurious; in fact the guests slept in "brush blankets" on mattresses of bracken and cedar boughs. The myriad mosquitoes prevented sleep, but the thunder of the falls was music to the ears of the weary travellers.

So might we transcribe the florid, wordy account written by James M. Hutchings, leader of the party. The reason for my interest in this partic-

ular group of visitors is centered on the fifth member: a Mr. Charles L. Weed, a photographer whose exploits, under incredible difficulties, have been almost if not entirely forgotten.

This interest was aroused when I opened a certain large drawer in the Yosemite Museum in 1956 and found an album of old wet plate prints, which had lain forgotten, except by a few scholars, on one shelf or another since 1860.

In 1956 my husband and I had returned to the Valley to continue our work as collaborators. The chief project assigned to us, that summer, was the taking of a series of slides designed to illustrate Mission 66 and travel to the Park during the past hundred years. We also planned to continue our collection of "Then and Now" pictures which we had started in 1947 when we retraced the footsteps of Dr. Matthes, matching the

photographs in his "Paper 160" in order to show vegetation changes in the Park.

The album that I found, was, at best, a makeshift affair, being a book of old mining certificates in which the prints had been tipped. A letter found with the album stated, in effect, that these prints had been taken, "a water-soaked bundle" from the fire-scarred ruins of the home of James M. Hutchings in San Francisco in 1880 and given to a boyhood friend of Mr. Hutchings' son, one Arthur S. Rosenblatt. It was he who put the pictures in the album and in 1925 decided to give the collection to the Yosemite Museum. The letter concludes with the words: "These pictures have never been fully identified." Here was a challenge! Why not try? And thereby add to our "Then and Now" series. Little did I realize that this "bear's-tail" I had seized was a true California grizzly in whose pursuit I would travel from one end of the state to the other!

The Rosenblatt album contained forty-seven views, 20 from Yosemite, 17 from the American River, 6 from Forest Hill, 2 from Coloma and 2 from Placerville. All but two of these sites have been re-photographed, a job undertaken by my husband, a tireless hiker, an ardent photographer and a long-suffering mate. In many cases he has been able to match the lens Mr. Weed used. In some, by comparing shadows, he can calculate the hour, even the minute, when Mr. Weed's shutter clicked!

Our first significant clue came when we proved that these were the photographs from which Thomas Armstrong made the wood cuts

which were used in Hutchings' *California Magazine* (1859-1860). This magazine was distributed widely and can be found in many of the large reference libraries.*

We have also located two other albums, one at Stanford (Palo Alto) the other at Eastman House (Rochester, New York). The latter has the American River series but no Yosemite views. Stanford's set is very similar to the Yosemite album but includes a series on Nevada. Both of these albums were attributed to different photographers. Until we undertook this research and actually compared copies, the libraries concerned were unaware that the other two albums were related. It is, however, high time that we return to our party of hardy travellers, whom we left slapping mosquitoes on the south bank of the Merced River where Sentinel Bridge now stands

Dramatis personae:

First, we should introduce the editor of the magazine, to which we have already referred:- James Mason Hutchings. He was twenty nine years of age and a California resident since 1849. He had tried his hand at gold mining and as a correspondent for the *Placerville Mountain Democrat*. A stationery and book store in San Francisco, supplemented such income as he received from his magazine. A photo taken about 1859 shows that he wore a large beard combed to a double point.

From incidents and remarks in his account we gather that he was the chief promoter of this trip. It is clear that several other friends made plans to be in the Valley at this time, for we read:, after three of the original

*The quotes used here will be found in Volume four, numbers four, five, six and nine. Two other accounts that I have compared with Hutchings' statements are Dr. Ewer's Diary (M.S.) and James

Lamson's account of his own California travels (M.S.), both are in the vault of the California Historical Society in San Francisco.

group have left, . . . "Being reinforced by a party of old friends of both sexes, our cavalcade set out." page 248) We also learn of two artists who joined him on one or more of his climbs (pps. 200 and 386). One of these, James Lamson mentions Mr. Hutchings several times while in the valley and travelled with him to Clark's ranch on their way to the Mariposa Grove.

Next we introduce the Rev. Ferdinand C. Ewer, his wife Sophie and her friend Miss Marianna Neil. Of the latter nothing further is learned except that she accompanied the Ewers on their trip to the northern mines after they left Yosemite on the 22nd and that she was sufficiently emancipated to travel by herself from Angel's Camp, via Stockton "on her way back to San Francisco".

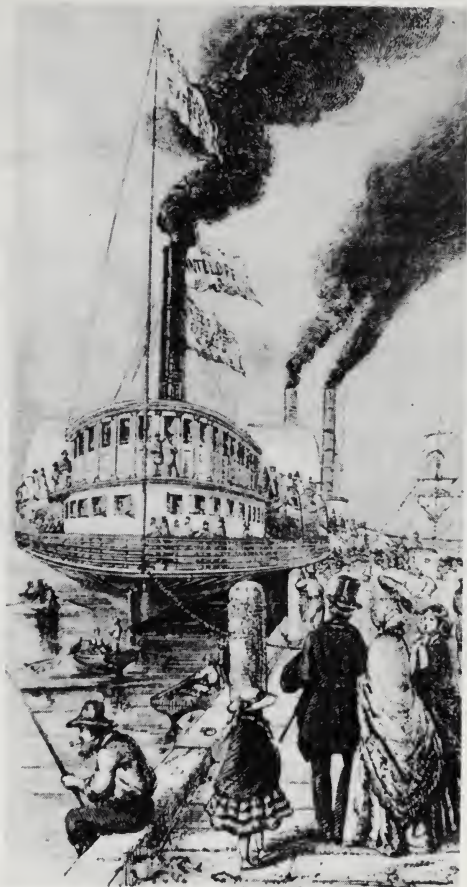
Dr. Ewer, a Harvard graduate, was thirty three. He had earned his living as editor of *The Pioneer Magazine* (1854 to 1855); early in 1857 he had been ordained and became rector of Grace Church in December on the same year. A portrait made in 1859 shows that he had no moustache but wore rather heavy chin whiskers.

Of our fifth member, Charles L. Weed, we will write later. Suffice it to say that his trail is hard to find, and only after gathering many slender clues in all sorts of places, was it possible to learn the few facts to be presented here.

Questions and Contradictions Arise:

It would be of less importance in which order the pictures were taken had it not been for a curious statement made twenty seven years later by Mr. Hutchings. This statement regards the *First* picture.

Soon after the Yosemite series had appeared in Hutchings' *California Magazine* he sold the name, reported-



The Ewers and Miss Neil left from Jackson Street Wharf, San Francisco, on June 11, 1859, aboard the *Dragon* (background) bound for Stockton. This was the first leg of their journey to Yosemite Valley.

ly for a suit of clothes, but kept the rights to the plates and copy. Some of this material he published in book form. The first edition of *Scenes of Wonder and Curiosity in California* appeared in 1861, where much of the material is given word for word as it appeared in the magazine; except where a word such as 'cooned' (i.e. as a coon crawls) has been changed to "walked" as perhaps more dignified. The cut of the hotel has been dropped. Further editions appeared in 1861, 1862, 1870 and 1876 no ref-



Hite's Hotel, June 21, 1859. This is the first photograph ever taken of a building in Yosemite but evidently not the first photograph taken in Yosemite Valley as Hutchings claimed!

erence is made in these texts to the hotel. Not until 1886, after he had finally left the Valley did he reissue an edition called *In the Heart of the Sierras* in which he used the old upper Hotel cut and saw fit to write "Soon after its formal opening Mr. C. L. Weed, the pioneer photographer of Yo-Semite . . . (was) . . among the first guests. The accompanying illustration is from the first photograph ever taken in Yo-Semite and by C. L. Weed in June 1859."

But Hutchings and Ewer both testify that the party arrived long after dark and that the first morning was spent at the base of Yosemite Falls. Hutchings mentions a photograph (p. 195), being taken after which they had lunch and then rode up the north bank to Mirror Lake where

"the rapidly declining sun and an admonishing voice from our organs of digestion . . . recommend an early departure for the hotel and dinner . ." (p. 199).

Hence we claim that the picture of the Falls that we found in the Stanford album was the first photograph ever taken in Yosemite (see cut). But we can still consider the hotel photograph the first of a building in Yosemite.

It has amused us, therefore, to find just when this exposure was made. So turning our attention to this photograph, and revisiting the site, we realized that the shadows indicate that it was made with the sun on the west side of the building! This means it must have been taken at lunch time or soon thereafter.

Under a hand lens the cut reveals four persons sitting on a bench in front of the hotel. The photo shows six, two had nothing to do with the story and so were deleted by the engraver.

Assuming for the moment that the four persons sitting on the bench are Mr. Hutchings, Dr. Ewer, Mrs. Ewer and Miss Neil, let us see on which day they might have taken their mid-day meal at the hotel. Turning to the Ewer diary we read that they lunched below Bridalveil on Sunday. On Monday he went to Vernal and Nevada and on Wednesday he and the ladies left the Valley before sunrise. However, on Tuesday the 21st he says: "Rode around the Valley generally." Hutchings, who spent Monday climbing to Yosemite Point with James Lawson says: "While recruiting a little after our fatiguing trip . . . we met the Rev. P. Veeder:" So that it appears that the 21st is the only day the party could have been gathered together for such a picture. What evidence can we muster that these four persons are our group of travellers?

The Hidden Portraits:

The engraving in these articles fall into three catagories; those attributed to Mr. Weed come from the large prints; smaller plates with rounded corners appear to come from the stereos, while others are artist's sketches. The concluding article, although Hutchings treats it as an entirely separate one, tells of his trip to Clark's Ranch and the Mariposa Grove. It is illustrated with sketches by George Tyrell and James Lamson, with a frontice of bear hunting that resembles the work of Charles Nahl or his brother Arthur.

The sketches that appear in the first article (October, 1859) also resemble the Nahl's work and one is obscurely signed "A.N. 55". But who ever the artist may have been, he included such a wealth of detail, that we are forced to the conclusion, that he must have known, or in some cases, been given, a remarkably accurate description of everyone's appearance. Beardsley is shoeless, Clark is hatless and when they are benighted "Buck" sleeps beside the

Hutchings, Ewer, Mrs. Ewer, and Miss Neil. Detail from photo on left.





James Mason Hutchings, 1859

fallen log just as Hutchings describes it on page 392.

Another illustration, not used as a part of the series, shows three persons who resemble Dr. and Mrs. Ewer with Miss Neil about to depart on the "Dragon" for Stockton, Mr. Hutchings appears as a fisherman, while a stanchion near by carries a placard advertising the July issue of *Hutchings' California Magazine*. All this caused me to study two other cuts very closely. "The Start" is on page 149 and "Descending the Mountain to the Yosemite Valley" on page 155. In both of these pictures we see the party and their guide. With the aid of a hand lens we can see that the beards of two men in the party are trimmed as the two known portraits of Hutchings and Ewer. Similar beards are seen on the men in the group on the bench, outside the hotel. The faces of the two women

are the same as those shown in the sketches.

Hence, I suggest that the persons on the bench are Hutchings, Ewer, Mrs. Ewer and Miss Neil. Furthermore, considering the faithfulness with which the others are portrayed I feel justified in supposing that in the third man we see in the two cuts is a true and reasonable likeness of Charles Weed. Beside the Yosemite views the album contains twenty pictures of "Turning the River." In one of these I believe we can recognize the same man. But the report on those pictures will be made separately.

The Photographer is Slighted:

Hutchings included in his Yosemite articles, Indian legends, copy from other writers, and describes the scene around him, with such grandiloquent verbosity that we are mysti-

Rev. Ferdinand C. Ewer, 1859



ied by the cavalier manner in which he photographer of the expedition was treated. Except for the credits under the cuts Mr. Weed is mentioned only once as a member of the party. When they climb up the canyon of the South Fork to take a picture of Illilouette Fall Mr. Beardsley gets the attention as the man who carried the camera. On page 244 we read: "Mr. Beardsley who had volunteered to carry the camera had it inverted and strapped at his back, where it looked more like an Italian Hurdy Gurdy than a photographic instrument . . . Another carried the stereoscopic instrument and another the plate holders and gun, etcetera." On page 246 as they climbed over the rocks Hutchings continues, "It was amusing as it was astonishing, to see Buck advancing sure and shoeless feet, seeking to avoid the overhanging limbs of this tree, or that rock, lest . . . the instru-

ment, one end of which was nearly a foot above his head, should strike them and not only throw him backwards, at the risk of his neck, but break the instrument into numberless and unnecessary parts."

After speaking of the steepness of the climb, (and, of course, the scenery), he mentions taking certain pictures, the back of South Dome (Half Dome) and a side view of Illilouette Fall, chosen because the narrow canyon prevented a full view.

And that is all! No further mention of the camera or its operator is made. Neither Ewer or Lamson mention the photographer while in the Valley and the rest of Hutchings account is designed to persuade others to visit this eighth wonder of the world.

Nevertheless, we know that Weed returned with at least twenty large glass plates and forty stereos and that Mr. Vance advertised these for

the Start. Hutchings mentions the scrawney horses and the artist drew them accordingly. To R - Guide, Mrs. Ewer, Miss Neil, Hutchings, Ewer and Weed.





Yosemite Falls. The first photograph taken in Yosemite Valley. Charles L. Weed, June 18, 1837 at 11:25 a.m. The original print is at The Stanford Library.

sale at his San Francisco gallery. Mr. Vance's part in this story will be explained later.

A Forty Pound Camera:

Before we tell what little we have learned concerning Charles Weed it may be helpful to draw a word-

picture of the trials and tribulation of a photographer during the years 1851 to 1880. This is the era of the wet plate.

First the camera was set up on sturdy, five-foot, non-folding tripod. The picture composed on the ground glass, naturally all images were u

side down. Next the operator disappeared into the previously erected tent he used for a dark room. In this hot and airless cubicle he faced various hazards, such as spilled chemicals, invasions by curious children or a disastrous blast of wind. Here he carefully mixed the chemicals, which had to be poured evenly, without bubbles, onto the glass plate which was then tilted until the entire surface was coated. Collodion containing iodide of potassium came first; next the plate was dipped in a bath of silver nitrate solution and placed in a plate holder. Speed was of the utmost importance and the sweating operator would hurry back to the camera, insert the plate, expose it for ten seconds or even for one and a half minutes; then quickly back to the cramped interior of

the tent before the ether in the collodion evaporated and much of the definition of the picture was lost. Pyrogallic acid or protosulphate of iron was used as a developer. The picture was then fixed with hyposulphate of soda or cyanide of potassium. Next the plate had to be allowed to dry where it would remain free from dust.

One operator, describing a photographic jaunt made about 1860, tells us his camera taking 9" x 11" plates weighed about twenty-one pounds, each plate about one pound. Six pictures were considered a good day's work and a three minute walk from the darkroom tent the limit the photographer dared to go. Again we note that when Monsieur Bisson climbed Mont Blanc, in Switzerland, in July 1861, he had with him a guide

A photographer's field equipment of the 1870's.



and twenty-five porters. He achieved the summit (15,781 ft.) with difficulty and returned with a few plates to receive wide acclaim while Mr. Weed's earlier exertions passed almost unnoticed.

From the above we can estimate something of the weight of the equipment carried on the Yosemite trip. Since Mr. Weed's plates measured about 10" x 15", each piece of glass weighed about one and a half pounds and a camera to hold such a plate must have weighed at least forty pounds. To this we must add a conservative hundred pounds for a tent, chemicals, bottles, dishes and a complete stereo outfit!

Charles L. Weed and his Contemporaries:

All attempts to learn anything of the photographers who first clambered up and down the rocky slopes of Yosemite with their immense cameras lead back to Robert H. Vance, who, in 1859, was considered San Francisco's leading daguerrian. Besides the large main office he maintained rooms in Sacramento and San Jose; after 1860 he opened others in Carson and Virginia City, Nevada.

One of Yosemite's most famous photographers, Carleton E. Watkins worked for Vance for three years (1853-1857). Later he opened his own gallery on Monterey Street not far from Vance; therefore, it seems likely that he knew Weed and his work. Watkins first visited Yosemite in 1861 and thereafter returned again and again, until his name became indelibly linked with the Valley. Another famous pictorialist who was connected with the Vance studio after it passed into the hands of Bradley and Rulofsen was Eadweard Muybridge. He came to the west coast in 1860, and is remembered best for

his interval photographs of trotting horses. His early work is signed "Helios." In 1867 he visited Yosemite and took a series of large scenic views. His pictures measured twenty-two inches square and it should be noted here that he penetrated the "back country" as far as Tenaya Lake and Cathedral Peak. We have already found and retaken some of these high country pictures (and they are, in my opinion, superior to those of Watkins, or his contemporaries.) But to return to the trail of the evanescent pioneer Charles Weed.

From early Sacramento Directories we learned that Mr. Weed came from Wisconsin, was single, and that as early as 1885 he had his own daguerrian gallery on J Street. It is also stated that Mr. Vance had a suite of rooms at the corner of 3rd and J Streets. By February 1858 Weed had disposed of his gallery and become junior partner with Mr. Vance. Deleting some of the flowery language of their notice, we read in the Sacramento Daily Union that they have opened a gallery "which for beauty, accommodations . . . and arrangements . . . is unsurpassed in California and are now ready to furnish our patrons with Ambrotypes, Photographs or Daguerreotypes," etc., signed, Vance and Co. Co.

In October 1858 Mr. Weed made a trip up the Middle Fork of the American River and penetrated at least as far as Forest Hill; where he took a series of River Mining pictures. These were a part of the Yosemite album and since 1956 we have located and rephotographed all of them.

While Mr. Weed was still on this trip, or had just returned to Sacramento, disaster struck in San Francisco. Fire destroyed the third floor work rooms and offices of the Vance

gallery and water did considerable damage in the gallery below. A vivid description, on November 2nd, in the *Daily Alta* mentions that Mr. Vance "burnt his hand quite severely." However, he re-opened in January, but evidently made plans to curtail his own outside work, for he says in one of his advertisements, "I have arranged my business so that hereafter I shall be at my rooms at all times to attend personally to my patrons."

A San Francisco directory indicates that Weed moved to San Francisco sometime during the spring of 1859 and resided on "Tay between Clay and Sacramento, (his occupation) a daguerrian artist with R. H. Vance." Vance mentions several of his employees in his notices but never Weed unless the following refers to him, ". . . others connected with my establishment . . ." From all we assume that Weed had moved to San Francisco to become Mr. Vance's "outside man", a position that would make him the most logical candidate to be sent on the arduous Yosemite expedition.

After the travellers returned to San Francisco, Mr. Vance advertised in January, 1860: "Stereoscopic Views of the principal places in the State, with forty different views taken in the Yosemite Valley, (including its immense water falls, of which one is twenty-five hundred feet high) and of the Mariposa Big Trees, of which is ninety-four feet in circumference . . ."

And again the trail disappears until we learn that Charles Weed purchased the Vance Gallery in 1861 and in the city directory for 1862 we see him listed as:

"WEED. Charles L. proprietor, Vance's Photographic Gallery, s.w. corner Montgomery and Sacramento. dwl. 909 Clay".

But the October 1863-64 directory does not list Weed and Bradley and Rulofsen now have the Vance gallery. A short notice in the *Alta* indicated that Weed's health was bad.

One more glimpse is vouchsafed before he disappears from view. We find him back in Yosemite. It is July 1864, his old friend James Hutchings has recently purchased the upper

The Yosemite Valley from Inspiration Point Trail. An early Watkins' photograph.



hotel and we may suppose that Weed made it his headquarters. He revisited his old photographic sites, (but not Illilouette Fall). He took several views in Little Yosemite, reaching the cascade under Sugarloaf Dome, and he travelled up Illilouette Creek to take a view of Mount Starr King. Twenty-eight of these pictures are in an album in the New York Public Library, all signed C. L. Weed. They are bound with thirty-one Yosemite pictures by Watkins, also signed. In our research on Watkins we have found six of these prints among collections attributed to Mr. Watkins. We can only assume that Watkins purchased the plates from Weed. Before that Weed allowed them to be used as illustrations in Harper's Magazine for April 1866. So again we find evidence that Watkins and Weed were not only acquainted with one another, but worked together too. We have thus found three sets of pictures that

this long forgotten man made. A fourth still awaits verification. Of Weed's first trip into the Yosemite, some may be seen at Stanford and at the Bancroft, where the Yosemite find is now deposited. The mining pictures are also on file in the above institutions and in Rochester, New York in the Eastman Library of Photography.

From all of this we can trace something of a man and his work. A man who was oblivious to rough trails, and blistering heat for something he considered worthwhile. We are left with a picture of a self-effacing artist, skilled in exacting media, to whom no physical exertion was too great if a beautiful or interesting photograph could be obtained. Someday more may be learned of this man. But here the trail fades. We are left with his scenic photographs with which to remember him and the Yosemite he saw and recorded. Perhaps that is the way he would have wished it.

Our Thanks Are Due:

Naturally this paragraph should begin "...to my husband, without whose help this work would not have been possible." It is so true, but it is equally true of the members of the staff of the Yosemite Museum and also of the men and women in the historical libraries we have visited.

The quest has lead back and forth and up and down the state. I regret, time has not permitted me to visit the libraries in the east. But during the past four years our vacations have been spent travelling from the Stanford University Library to the Huntington in San Marino; from the Bancroft in Berkeley to the California Room in the Sacramento State Library - from there to the collections of the Oregon Historical Society in Portland and back to the Bay area to The Society of California Pioneer and California Historical Society's archives. More material was found in the care of the History and Art Association of Monterey and in the south the rare books room at The University of California at Los Angeles furnished further clues.

This then may be regarded as a preliminary report on an important facet of Yosemite history. Other aspects of our search will appear later. Meanwhile the hunt continues. Anyone wishing to help will be most welcome and we will be happy to share our work with them.

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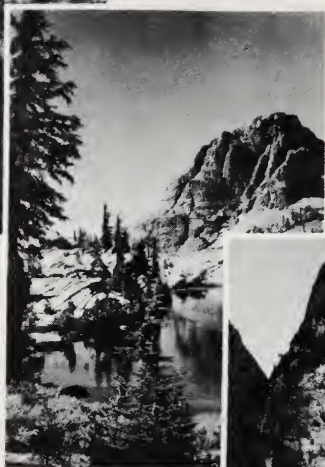
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